

## **The discursive governance of population politics: the evolution of a pro-birth regime in Turkey**

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# Discursive Governance of Population Politics: The Evolution of the Pro-birth Regime in Turkey

Keywords: Turkey – Population Stagnation – Political Space – Political Discourse

## ABSTRACT

This article presents how Turkish politicians' discourse on population stagnation and growth becomes palpable – despite the healthy population growth in Turkey. Empirically, our article traces the slogans that the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, and the governing party politicians use to frame the 'population issue' in Turkey from 2008 to 2013. By using *Ajans Press* database comprising over 5,000 newspaper articles, we selected 120 of the news items that presented us with the politicians' slogans whereby general terms such as children, women, economy, family, morality, and birth featured. We show that the 'three children' slogan of the current President Erdoğan preceded and replaced policy deliberations regarding the making of population politics, but aimed at affecting public's deliberative reasoning discursively. We argue that normative mechanisms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation would generate discursive governance of population politics. Thereby, politicians could advance governance even without introducing major policy changes.

## INTRODUCTION

Population figures and fertility levels in a country can be exceptionally significant for public debates. The norms, discourses, policy measures, and institutions that are forged to intervene with population development define and qualify population politics. Its governance affects a plethora of political, economic and social issues, augmenting political, institutional, and societal power on personal choices. Particularly in less democratic political settings, population figures can relate to the leadership capacity of incumbent leaders (Quine 2013). This means that while population politics refers to policies, such as parental leave, employment, abortion, family responsibilities and benefits, it also comprises indirect expressions of political power via the means of biopolitics and governmentality in the determination and implementation of gender rights, socio-political and socio-economic regimes, and eventually regulation of political spaces. In assessing how politicians generate population politics, we are interested in their discursive construction in the absence of policies endorsing population growth.

Discourses create representations that not only reflect upon but also actively construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations. Political discourses become normative mechanisms in a way that they operate as mechanisms of political action directed to influence the public sphere in contexts where the institutional dimension of policy-making is traditionally weak (Korkut et.al. eds. 2015). In effect, we inspect how politicians affect public reasoning merely with slogans circulated in the media and delay introducing policy reforms. That is, we are interested in depicting a type of governance whereby normative mechanisms are embedded in political discourse and circulated in the public sphere to foster a discursive form of governance.

This article foregrounds the formulation of population politics as an area to elaborate on the operation of discursive governance. Discursive governance refers to implicit mechanisms of governance resting on narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors in political language to interpose ideas in order to affect political and social representations within the public sphere in accordance with the wishes of political authorities (Korkut et. al. eds., 2015). The dominant method for discursive research has thus far been discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008 and 2010). Discursive institutionalism approaches politics as a vigorous arena whereby discursive interactions prompt actors to refine, reframe and reinterpret their ideas. Not only is this process iterative and sometimes refers to contentious discourse in play between actors, but it also informs the evolution of political institutions. The ideas that define institutions, as well as the ideas shared by political actors, are in flux, often at odds, and malleable (Béland and Cox 2011, 10). To respond to this influx, discursive institutionalism foregrounds the logic of communication that permeates the discourse in which actors engage in the process of generating, deliberating, and/or legitimizing ideas about political action in institutional context (Schmidt 2010, 47).

The discursive governance method originates from discursive institutionalism. While the latter foresees deliberation, coordination, and communication in the political sphere by political actors and the public (Schmidt 2010, 48), discursive governance instead concentrates on explaining inculcation of ideas by political authorities to affect the collective rationality of the public. Hereby, deliberation and debate remain scarce, but fictional and at times historical references substantiate a one-way communication from the ‘wise politician’ to the public. In order to cater for the ‘influx’ that ideas foster, political and social actors resort to novel mythical, fictional, cultural, and ideological symbols as their tools, and appeal to the public’s

collective memory. The ideas do not inform the evolution of institutional change, but operate as individual tools to generate publics amenable to new politics. To reach their own aims without institutional changes, actors use the references that they have fictionalized as strategic discourses. In this way, they can foster amenable collective rationalities in support of their political goals without pushing contentious institutional changes. This tells political change without a change in political institutions.

In terms of population politics, we illustrate that the politicians' slogans and sentiments encompass economic and identity dimensions. Having children in this discourse has morality and responsibility implications. Politicians circulate slogans in the media supportive of their discourses. They use the media to inculcate ideas in public reasoning. The politicians' slogans, thereby, serve to bolster a pro-birth regime without the endorsing policies.

The importance of sustaining a growing population figure has received emphasis in many political contexts (Bertaux 2011; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Koontz 1997; Offen 1991 in Cole 2000, 185; Orleck 1997; Quine 1995; Robertson 2012). We elaborate on the governance of population politics within the Turkish political context. What is puzzling is that the Turkish pro-population increase discourse has emerged in a context where the population figure is not even an alarming issue. Figures from 2014 suggest a rate of growth: 2.17 children per woman. Hence, the current alarmist discourse demonstrates a skewed logic behind the fear exhibited by the governing AKP (Justice and Development Party) politicians as well as Erdoğan himself, who became President in August 2014. The recent prevalence of non-agricultural employment options, and the increasing affluence of the middle classes in the past decade in Turkey, may have recently resulted in a decline in the

number of children per woman and, hence, in the population-growth figure (Acar and Altunok 2013; Altıok 2013; Dedeoğlu 2013). As a result, the slowing population increase could be an impact of ‘compressed modernity’ that is taking shape in Turkey, which Chang Kyung-Sup (2010, 24) – reflecting on Korea – defined as a “social situation in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner with respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements, leading to highly complex and fluid social system”.

What is noteworthy is that other countries, such as Singapore, Italy, Korea, Japan, and China, have gone through compressed modernity, experienced urbanization and economic development, and faced stagnation in birthrates. Yet, in Turkey, the politicians choose to present this stagnation as a sign of moral and economic decline, and seek to stimulate morality and responsibility among women, men and particularly the young generation for reproducing. Population politics even becomes an arena where the governing party representing political Islam could enhance its control over gender identities by micromanaging conditions for childbirth.

If there is no acute stagnation and decrease in birthrates, then why should population figures be alarmist? Turkish population politics makes more sense if we consider the importance of childbearing in the national identity and the economic value of population growth for political regimes. Along with Turkey, one can certainly note Russia and Hungary to this extent. Earlier work on population politics predominantly refers to its identity aspect, particularly regarding the responsible role of women in serving the nation (Goldberg 2010; Koontz 1997; Offen 1991 in Cole, 2000; Orleck 1997; Robertson 2012) as well as the economic value of having a young and healthy population (Lisbon Agenda 2020; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005;

Guerrina, 2005). In contexts such as Turkey, where childcare is considered women's duty in the absence of institutional support for caretaking (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2011), the politicians' emphasis on having more children is a reflection of their conservative identity politics where 'good mothers' serve the social 'order'. It becomes yet another tool for the expression of patrimonial power (Adams and Charrad 2011). At the same time, the 'young and educated population' of Turkey is a tool for economic expansion and even a 'product' that the AKP government aims to exploit.<sup>1</sup> The neoliberal trajectory of economic development is well entrenched in President Erdoğan's discourse: recently, he indicated that one should run the country similar to a firm.<sup>2</sup> Hence, we elaborate on the politicians' emphasis on the economic value of having a young population within this political setting.

Considering the Turkish context, we demonstrate that identity and economic value not only interrelate but also mutually reinforce. In effect, we propose that the discursive construction of population politics in Turkey operates as a form of social engineering to boost population growth. Systematically circulated creative slogans appealing to the sentiments and moral values of the audience support this process, hence discursive governance, rather than introducing policies that would improve caretaking and support a generally family-friendly working environment. The most recent 3.6 per cent increase in the number of births from 2013 to 2014 may indicate that discourse works.<sup>3</sup> The formulation of this discursive space occupies our theoretical interest in the process of our unfolding discursive governance. We also shed new light on contemporary gender regimes in Turkey, and briefly elaborate on broader application of our theoretical study.

In the coming parts, we will first delineate the slogans and sentiments that the AKP politicians have circulated in the discursive space of population politics. We will



particularly depict the importance of the ‘three children’ slogan gained over time and how this slogan served to frame economy and identity issues related to Turkey’s future. We will underline the role of the semi-free media<sup>4</sup> to circulate this slogan and assist politicians to stir a moral panic (Cohen 2011). In order to present the attributions of population in these slogans more clearly, we grouped them under four clusters, namely, youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity. Our elaboration of these clusters indicates why we consider the identity aspect and the economic value of increasing population to collaborate in the Turkish context. The second part will discuss the theoretical implications for the case study to understand how discourses can function as tools of governance even in the absence of policies. In conclusion, we suggest that normative mechanisms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation generate a discursive governance of population politics. The political speech that we are analyzing is articulated by politicians and amplified by the semi-free media. While it is not our primary aim, our article also shows that in semi-democracies media boosts the resonance of political discourse even if it merely publicizes political statements. Subsequently, this discourse acquires an independent existence beyond the context where it is initially expressed. Thereby, politicians can advance governance even without introducing policy changes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to depict discursive formulations of population politics, we gathered our data using *Ajans Press* database comprising over 5,000 newspaper articles that appeared in local and national press since March 2008. This was around the time that the then Prime Minister Erdoğan started to use the ‘three children’ slogan more

frequently. In order to establish that this slogan has gained conspicuity in the public sphere, we conducted a systematic investigation of the data from 2008 to 2013 tracing the ‘three children’ slogan in discourses of AKP politicians expressed in political and public contexts. After 2013, we still followed national newspapers citing politicians’ discourse on the population issue almost on a daily basis. Our study depicts the diverse dimensions that Erdoğan’s slogans acquired over time. We also bring in other AKP politicians’ narration of the need for a more populous Turkey. We selected the politicians’ statements from our database of news items using a keyword search looking for such general terms as children, women, economy, family, morality, and birth. Our initial idea was to bring together general keywords such as ‘children and Erdoğan’, ‘children and economy’, ‘birth rate and economy’, and ‘women and morality’. However, the database did not allow any combination searches. Therefore, we had to go through all the articles where our keywords appeared separately, which was around 1600, given the general relevance of these keywords to many contexts, and decide whether or not each news article related to our research. At the same time, we adopted an inductive research method, allowing the text to help us elaborate on the framing of population politics rather than adopting specific stakes beforehand to analyze the data. Our approach to frame analysis, in this respect, originates from Goffman’s (1974) work and follows its later applications in Tankard et. al. (1991) and Lau and Schlesinger (2005).

In deciding on relevance, we considered the connection between pro-population discourse and the identity and economy arguments of the politicians. We also took into consideration the particular context where the politicians used a pro-population growth discourse, allowing us to see whether the tone of the discourse changed across contexts. We initially thought that the context could be part of the

resonance that the politicians may wish to achieve. However, it appeared that regardless of context, discourses were similar. That is, the speech at a wedding ceremony could replicate the discourse at an international conference.

After our examination of the database content, we selected around 120 news items that predominantly quoted the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, but also the Minister of State responsible for Women and Family Affairs and others, regarding the population issue in Turkey. Hence, less than 10 percent of articles qualified for inclusion. Most of the articles that we excluded did not relate to population politics and some of them repeated the discourse that we had already seen in another source. Occasionally, we came across statements from the wife of Erdoğan, the state-controlled Radio-Television Supreme Council or the Minister of Development. Following Erdoğan's appointment as President in August 2014, we encountered statements from the new Prime Minister Davutoğlu in support of the 'three children' discourse. While our database did not include his statements, we refer to them in the course of our article to illustrate the residual impact of Erdoğan's three-children slogan on the lingering meta-narrative of population politics proposed by AKP politicians. Overall, political discourses refer to the population issue in relation to prosperity inasmuch as a healthy and strong population discourse suggests an expression of power, a foundation of economy, and a source of labor, capital stock, consumption and production. In order to present the attributions of the slogans examined more clearly, we grouped them in four clusters, namely youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity. This allowed us to depict how politicians' slogans sustain our inductively generated dimensions of population politics.

From the dataset, we also separated news on possible policy changes in parental leave, labor market regulations, family-friendly work environment, abortion, etc., as not all of these policies have been actualized. Given the limited formal institutionalization of a new population politics despite ongoing policy signals by the government, we consider that the ad hoc slogans in circulation generate a discursive space where politicians configure and transmit population politics ideationally. This is based on our theoretical assumption that insomuch as the AKP operates population politics merely through discourses, it avoids possible socio-political and economic conflicts that a full-scale policy change such as extended parental leave or an abortion ban would instigate in gender, labor market, and social politics. This is the reason why we choose to study the making of population politics through tracing discourses.

Finally, we studied the remaining news items looking for direct citations from politicians' speeches on the population issue. This helped us to verify that each citation was accurate, looking at how the same speech appeared as a news item in other newspapers published on the same day. As a sign of the role of media in semi-democratic contexts, almost all newspapers published on that particular day referred to these speeches, though at varying lengths. Thereby, we did not engage with the media outlets' framing of discourse, but rather concentrated on their reporting with citations taken from politicians' speeches in diverse venues on the issue of population. These venues varied from international and national events to constituency visits and wedding ceremonies. We noted Jørgensen and Phillips' (2002) assessment that language is not neutral and discourse should be empirically analyzed within its social context. However, following Jayyusi (1991 in Leudar and Nekvapil 2004, 247) indicating that "media texts are addressed not to a specific person or sets of persons with known properties, relevancies and beliefs, but rather to a public at large", we

take the Turkish public sphere as the social context and de-emphasize the immediate environmental factors regarding politicians' framing of the population issue. This is due to our observation that the politicians, and especially Erdoğan, formulate their discourses not for the immediate audience, but for consumption by the general public, being sure of the role that the media will play in the subsequent dissemination in a country where media freedom is limited (See Lu, Aldrich and Shi 2014 for China).

### **SLOGANS, SENTIMENTS, AND POPULATION POLITICS**

The population debate in Turkey is most famously represented by President Erdoğan's 'three children' slogan, gaining resonance since the beginning of his tenure as Prime Minister in 2002. This slogan serves to frame socio-economic and socio-political dimensions of the population number and link it to future Turkish prosperity, identity, and power. We depict this process as a way for Erdoğan to articulate his ideas in an issue area that plausibly did not matter much to the Turkish public before his manifestations. Erdoğan encourages his audience to view the issue of having children on his own terms, and then reminds people to contribute to the fertility and fecundity of the Turkish nation. Inasmuch as the semi-free media continued to resonate his discourse, over time Erdoğan became the sole authority that subsequently instigated a 'moral panic' using population stagnation or decline as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen 2011). As we depict below, other AKP politicians, recently including the new Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, joined Erdoğan in this quest.

Essentially, the Turkish discursive governance of population politics single-handedly concentrates on boosting population growth with a discursive construction of the value that 'three children' per family promises for the future. Going through

news citations, to name a few, we came across Erdoğan's framing of the population problem with the use of slogans such as: "1 child means bankruptcy, 2 children mean bankruptcy, 3 children merely means stagnation" (Speech at International Summit for Family and Social Policy, *NTVMSNBC*, 3.1.2013); "for a young population, citizens should always have three children" (Speech at World Family Summit, *Günlük*, 7.12.2009); "scientifically, even two children suggest decline" (Speech at the Council for Elderly Assembly, *Milliyet*, 11.10.2009). Furthermore, in an interview on 2 September 2010 with *Kanaltürk*, Erdoğan indicated that financial considerations should not affect couples' decisions for having children. Davutoğlu placed himself in this debate by adopting an economy-oriented need for a larger population, as he indicated, "major powers consider population as a major source. If you wish to understand the long-term development trend of a country, you need to recognize [the importance of] population" (Speech at AKP Parliamentary Group weekly meeting, T24, 13.01.2015).

Insomuch as the governance of population politics relies on slogans and lacks policy deliberation of any substance, the AKP government can delay fundamental policy reforms in maternity leave, childcare, and a family-friendly working environment – but introduce short-cut solutions such as extending free IVF treatment to couples and increasing financial assistance to civil servants with three or more children. That is why discursive governance of population politics becomes operational rather than institutionalized policy mechanisms. While various AKP governments have signaled new policies, thus far they did not carry them forward. The most important of these was intended to increase the current maternal leave period to 18 weeks for mothers and from 3 days to 10 days for fathers. One can also mention the debate around the introduction of a retirement system that would avail

social security contributions for retirement to working women on the basis of their number of children; or the allocation of unemployment insurance funds to support various policies seeking fertility increase, the direct payment of up to 1,300 TL to families with three children, and policy action with rather general goals of regulating reproductive health or protecting the family and the dynamic population structure. Prime Minister Davutoğlu recently joined the population politics debate by introducing a new program entitled ‘The Protection of the Dynamic Population Structure of Family’ that would seek to protect women and discuss women’s labor force participation within the frame of population politics.<sup>5</sup> His new idea is to introduce a state contribution of up to 15 percent to a ‘dowry fund’ that parents would pay into until their children reached marriage age.<sup>6</sup>

While policy action to introduce these measures remains absent, discourses turn into regulatory frameworks. The issue of abortion is a noteworthy example. Abortion became a political issue with the then Prime Minister Erdoğan’s involvement and consideration of it as a major inhibitor of population growth. Yet, even if there have been no policy changes in abortion regulation that allows abortion up to 10 weeks in Turkey, Diner (2013) showed that it is highly unlikely that public hospitals would carry out abortions unless there were health complications during pregnancy. In other words, while the legal time period for an abortion is 10 weeks, or 20 weeks for rape victims and those with life-threatening medical conditions, public hospitals are effectively not carrying out any abortions. To this extent, rather than following the legislation, the public hospitals subscribe to the discourse of the President. According to the Turkish Gynecologists and Obstetrics Federation, the Ministry of Health simply removed the code for abortion from the online hospital

entry forms at public hospitals, effectively declassifying abortion as a medical practice at its hospitals.<sup>7</sup>

In order to depict how discursive articulations replace policy actions, we first outline the AKP politicians' strategies to legitimize and disperse their interpretation of the population issue for public deliberation (Reyes 2011). Politicians' references to morality and responsibility stimulate the public to engage with the population issue. Therefore, their frequent appeal to the emotions of the public is the main means of dispersing and legitimizing the interpretation of population politics in accordance with the domineering AKP discourse. Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999, 92 in Reyes, 2011, 785) indicate that appealing to emotions allows social actors to skew the opinion of their interlocutors or audience regarding a specific matter. In this process, the negative representation of some "social actors and the attribution of negative qualities to their personalities or their actions allow speakers to create two sides of a given story/event, in which speaker and audience become the 'us-group' and the social actors depicted negatively constitute the 'them-group'" (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92 in Reyes 2011, 785).

This has been a general political strategy for Erdoğan, and not singularly for population politics, to acclaim moral rationality to retain his supporter base and rebuff criticisms especially in gender issues. To present another example, around the same time as our empirical study Erdoğan discursively set the norms for how university students should live in shared houses. Instigating a moral crusade against mixed gender student houses, Erdoğan stated that "one never knows what goes on in mixed gender student housing; [they are] disorderly and anything is possible".<sup>8</sup> Even if no legislation followed Erdoğan's statements, skillfully he indicated that neighbors, homeowners, and local authorities should be wary of these situations and should



report these houses to police. Hence, once more, Erdoğan set the tone of political action that the government wished to pursue with discourses but did not lay down any terms of legislation. Any legislation to this effect would be impossible, given the Turkish constitutional system guaranteeing the privacy of the individual and the prospective pro-privacy position of the European Court of Human Rights in effect. Yet, in this instance, as well, Erdoğan delineated the “us-group” as his “conservative party to whom the children of the nation are entrusted” versus the critical intellectuals as the “them-group”<sup>9</sup> to acclaim the moral, if not the rational-legal authority.

With respect to the population issue, the ‘us-group’ is the family that Erdoğan as an ‘authoritarian father’ purports to represent when he expresses that “uncontrolled moral erosion worries us. [...] We cannot tell our families that our children are free to go wherever they wish” (Speech at AKP Ankara Province 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, *Yeni Nesil*, 7.22.2009). While Erdoğan appeals to emotions, he also establishes his authority over the population issue in a way that depicts AKP as the responsible voice that resonates the importance of having and guaranteeing the welfare of children (Aliye Kavaf, the ex-Minister for Family and Women Affairs, *Dokuz Sütun*, 9.16.2009). A further reflection of this authority was the decision by the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council that “condom advertisements affect the moral development of the youth and children”, as well as the subsequent penalty to *CNNTurk* for broadcasting these advertisements (*Birgün*, 9.21.2009). In Turkey, there is no legislation to the effect that birth control tools can compromise moral development of adolescents. Yet, in this instance, the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council simply followed Erdoğan’s authoritative discourse regarding morality to ban these advertisements rather than the legal framework of the Republic.

An in-group inevitably needs an out-group to exist, and ‘othering’, that is, transforming the difference with the external into otherness to generate an in-group identity, consolidates the out-group. Erdoğan states: “I look at the rich; I don’t see more than two children. They assume that children are burdensome. However, that is the real richness. [...] I see citizens having at least three children as an issue of national survival” (Erdoğan, TV interview, *Kanaltürk*, 9.2.2010). Thereby, he presents those with fewer than three children as the ‘rich’ and by definition the out-group of his supporters. In his assessment, “the real richness is children and, henceforth, it is not possible to become rich with a decreasing population” (Speech at a wedding, *Yenişafak*, 11.2.2009), and the out-group is merely too selfish in declining such national prosperity in favor of their own financial considerations. Hereby, Erdoğan appeals to emotions: “A least three children! We need to accomplish this. [...] Every newborn comes with his/her own means of subsistence. Others deceive themselves only with [their] account statements. Others played too much with these [statements]. Yet, they still could not save themselves as we see in Europe” (Speech at Local Governments and Family Symposium, *Sabah*, 4.2.2012).

By contrast, those who belong to Erdoğan’s us-group are the ‘ideal Turkish women’, and they bear children for the sake of the nation. This is where the identity aspect of population politics becomes more overt. Erdoğan asserts: “I am calling to mothers. [...] As a Turkish mother, as a Turkish woman, you need to spoil these games [reference to population control]. Secondly, I am calling to fathers. [...] You need to spoil this game in solidarity with your spouses” (Speech at ‘Becoming a Family’ project meeting, *Milliyet*, 6.18.2013). Furthermore, to give birth becomes a national duty for the future of the Turkish Republic, even if it may contradict women’s integrity and choices regarding abortion. In an interview, the ex-Minister of

Health Recep Akdağ was graphical regarding abortion and presented it as a disgraceful act even if it is legal: “At the moment, abortion is legal in this county until 10 weeks of pregnancy. Those who want can have the baby in their womb removed, scraped, shoveled up” (*Milliyet*, 6.1.2012). Erdoğan also attached a metaphor to abortion as he declared “every abortion is Uludere” (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 26.05.2012), drawing an analogy between abortions and an air strike by the Turkish air force that killed 34 civilians at the Iraqi border at Uludere in December 2011. Furthermore, Erdoğan, emotively warns the nation that abortion as well as caesarean births are “secret plots designed to stall Turkey’s economic growth and a conspiracy to wipe the Turkish nation from the world stage” (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 26.05.2012). Furthermore, he went on to state, “both abortion and caesarean births are murder. I am a Prime Minister who opposes caesarean births” (*Habertürk*, 28.05.2012). Optimistically, Erdoğan’s elaboration of caesarean births as murderous is a farfetched attempt to dissuade the general public from a practice that is costly for the welfare state. However, in his discourse caesarean births also indicate deception. He argues for childbirth with low costs to the welfare state, but reminds at the same time to the us-group that they “need to spoil population control games. [Their goal] is to decrease the population of this nation so that this nation falls behind” (Erdoğan, Speech at ‘To become a family’ project meeting, *Milliyet*, 6.18.2013). Hence, in a way and wrongfully, he configures a costly birth giving method as a population control tool. Then, he discourages the us-group from resorting to this method, but believe that caesarean births serve for population control games.

In their political discourse, actors can seek to legitimize their positions via referring to a hypothetical future, that is, preventing a threat in the future requires our imminent action in the present (Dunmire, 2007 in Reyes, 2011: 786). Evidently,

Erdoğan states that “for a healthy and strong future, we need to maintain the proportion of the young population at a particular [i.e. high, in Turkish] level” (Speech at the Council for Elderly Assembly, *Milliyet*, 11.10.2009), and there is no power without population (Speech at a wedding, *Yenişafak*, 11.2.2009). At another wedding ceremony, Erdoğan associated responsibility with patriotism, once again resonating the identity aspect: “I expect at least three patriotic kids from this young couple” (Speech at a wedding, *Radikal*, 7.14.2009). His ex-minister Kavaf conveyed a similar message during a constituency visit: “Children play a key role in our future” (*Hizmet*, 11.7.2009). And for the future, “we need to remain young while we are developing until we become rich. [...] The coup d’états of 1960 and 1980 stalled our population increase” (Interview with the Ex-Minister of Development Cevdet Yılmaz, *Radikal*, 5.14.2013). Essentially, the AKP politicians become the voice of reason to persuade the new generation to reproduce dutifully to cater for a hypothetical future that undemocratic military interventions sought to stall. The centrality of the new generation to reaching a hypothetical future is illustrated below.

Never forget that you are the offspring of the greatest civilization on Earth. I believe that you will be worthy of these lands and your ancestors and you will be in charge of the sciences of the West and perpetuate the wisdom of the East on Earth (Aliye Kavaf, Speech at the Ceremony for children under state care starting university, *Yarın*, 9.4.2009).

Political actors also enact legitimization when they present it as a process whereby decisions have been made after a heeded, evaluated and thoughtful procedure (Reyes 2011, 787). As presented above, when the AKP politicians appeal to emotions and target a hypothetical future with political discourse, they also present an authoritative discourse to show that they have reached these conclusions after much deliberation. Some brief examples are as follows: Prosperity in Turkey, says Kavaf, is possible with a large and educated population, which requires having always

three children (Kavaf, Speech at Opening ceremony of an orphanage in Burdur, *Hizmet*, 11.17.2009; Erdoğan, Speech at World Family Forum, *Günlük*, 12.07.2009). For prosperity, population is the ‘accelerating force’ for Turkey (Erdoğan, TV interview, *Kanaltürk*, 9.2.2010), and even the out-group should accept that ‘one cannot prevent unemployment by not having children and later you start talking about elderly population’, as Erdoğan announced at the International Istanbul Meeting of the feminist group *KADINist* (*Hürriyet*, 10.28.2010).

A similar method of legitimization is by a ‘voice of expertise’. This is embedded in the discourse to display to audiences that politicians are experts uttering knowledgeable statements. This legitimization refers to the ‘authorization’ (Van Leeuwen 2007) that a speaker brings to the immediate context of the current speech to strengthen his/her position. Politicians stand as authoritative sources, presenting information in a formal context, producing official and institutional discourse (Rojo and Van Dijk 1997, 530 in Reyes 2011, 787). Regardless of whether authority is enacted through authoritative voices, evoked by the speaker, or by the institutional position represented by the speaker, authority constitutes a strategy to legitimize actions. In our analysis, the voice of expertise becomes a tool of legitimization as politicians refer to scientists to indicate that ‘scientifically, even two children suggest decline’ (Erdoğan, Speech at the Assembly of Elderly Council, *Milliyet*, 10.11.2009) or to academics:

Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH) has a low population growth figure. BH needs to trigger this level in order to reach a youthful and dynamic population. In order for that, we also need the support of *hocalarımız* [i.e. priests or academics in Turkish, but given the location, probably the latter] [...] People are the foundation of the economy. If there are people, then you have labor, capital stock, consumption, and production. [...] Today, elderly population is the reason for Europe’s troubles (Erdoğan, Speech at University of Sarajevo, *Rota Haber*, 9.15.2012).

On another occasion, Erdoğan keenly presents examples from other countries to his audiences: “Do you know the population of India, China, or Japan? You see [these countries] among the most prosperous” (Erdoğan, Speech at the Assembly of Elderly Council, *Milliyet*, 10.11.2009). In other instances, he merely uses his title to persuade the public of his authority in the topic of population: “I uttered this yesterday at a UN meeting. I repeat. I am a Prime Minister who is against caesarean section, and I am aware that these are planned - specially planned! I know that this is a step to stall the population growth of this country” (Erdoğan, Speech at AKP Women’s Branch 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, *Radikal*, 5.27.2012).

In order to present the attributions of population in these slogans more clearly, we grouped them under four clusters that are inductively derived, namely, youth/young couples, children, population control/abortion, and prosperity/population increase. The following elaboration of these clusters indicates why we consider that the identity and the economic dimensions of population increase collaborate in Turkey. Table 1 illustrates these slogans and their attributions.

[Table 1 here]

At first glance, it appears in Table 1 that both the identity and the economic dimension of population politics enforce each other. Thereby, looking at slogans in circulation, the economic future of Turkey, the continuity of Turkish identity and the resulting future power of Turkey are all enmeshed. However, there are some distinct characters within each dimension. Let us start with the economic dimension.

The relationship between prosperity and population is clear. However, slogans creatively introduced to define ‘foundation of economy’, ‘national sustainability’ and ‘historical continuity’ in the form of replicating the ‘age of conquerors’, as well as ‘accelerating force’, also relate to this dimension. This shows that the framing of the

economic dimension of the population issue not only refers to population growth as a guarantee for continuity in economic growth, but also presents it as an accelerator of growth. At the same time, it also draws the attention of the public to the danger that ‘the rich’, anti-democratic forces such as the military as well as international conspirators – namely those seeking to ‘destroy’ the nation – may pose to the populous and prosperous future that an increasing population would guarantee. By playing on their patriotism, this framing calls on the young generations to ‘spoil’ the plans of those seeking to stall the power of the Turkish nation. This brings us to explore how the identity dimension is framed.

The framing of the population issue playing on its identity dimension received ample references in all our clusters. As was the case regarding the economy dimension, that framing not only avails slogans characterizing the relationship between identity and population, but it also reminds the youth of their duty to provide for continuity in Turkish identity. To this extent, population politics slogans associate fertility with patriotism, responsibility, merit, and health. Similar to the economy dimension, we can see references not only to continuity but also to the accentuation of identity, with slogans qualifying youth with ‘bearer of *always* 3 children’ and ‘expected to be in charge of both East and West’. Framing the population issue by acceleration or accentuation rather than healthy population growth is a discourse unique to AKP, as to our knowledge none of the other pro-birth regimes in other semi-authoritarian contexts in Europe, such as Hungary or Russia, seek accelerated growth. Sperling (2015) has started a debate on Russia regarding this issue, yet there is a need for further research in this area.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CASE STUDY**

Returning to our theoretical inquiry outlined above, we can ask how the framing of population politics discursively – through the use of slogans – relates to the governance of populations politics. In population politics literature, one can consider, among others, Bertaux (2011) on the population issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the West, Cole (2000) on France, Quine (1995) on Italy under Mussolini, and Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) on China, as well as Orleck (1997) on patriotism and motherhood. Most of the characteristics of population politics in these contexts are also evident in Turkey. Yet, as a contribution to this literature, we hereby suggest that normative mechanisms embedded in political discourse and circulated for public deliberation generate a discursive governance of population politics. In this respect, a crucial finding of our article is the injection of morality and responsibility discourses, associated with the identity and economy attributes of the population issue, into the public consideration of the population figure in Turkey. This stimulates the public to engage with the population issue on politicians' terms in order to contribute to a prosperous future of the nation. Slogans implying responsibility and childbearing, and spoiling conspiracies against the nation and the deliberate destruction of people support the framing of population politics in a way to bestow morality and responsibility to those who engage in population growth. Hence, the AKP establishment supports and conveys population politics as a custodian of moral politics and Erdoğan consolidates his own discourse.

Having a family for procreation is a significant element of conservative social politics in many polities. This features in the Islamist orientations of AKP politicians. Conservative social politics need various channels to sustain themselves once they materialize. Reference to morality and responsibility, especially when discussing gender issues, is one of them. While people may disagree about the sources of moral



principles, they all agree that living morally suggests the strength of will to do the right thing as required by those principles (Johnson 1993, ix). When it comes to morality issues, societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 2011). What we have witnessed in the Turkish context is instigation of moral panic around stagnating population figures. This has emerged as a condition to threaten societal values and national interests while politicians characterized it using the mass media, and called on the right-thinking people to man the moral barricades. Media, thereby, could thrust moral directives into the universe of discourse (Cohen 2011, 1-10) and often assist the ruling elite in weaving a discursive order (Koller 2005, 206; Pan and Kosicki 2003, 35). This potential of the media is consciously exploited by ‘moral entrepreneurs’ to aid them in their attempt to win public support for their cause (Cohen 2011, 10) and representations of reality. Therefore, the media becomes a tool for politicians to disseminate effective slogans into the public space where deliberation and public reasoning occur. Our case also shows how simply by publicizing the discourses of AKP politicians and especially Erdoğan on the population issues, the media performs as a tool for social representations of morality and responsibility.

When it comes to affecting the spatial-temporal conditions within which political power could be exercised for governments, the issue is how the territorial space of the nation could be effectively policed without intruding into the daily lives of its citizens. Foucault indicates that the center of political rationality that developed in the nineteenth century was neither the city nor the territory, but society. The governmental state was no longer defined in relation to its physical territory, or its surface area, but in relation to its social geography, its population, and its economy (Foucault 1991 in Barry 1996, 126). Thereby, communications technology came to

have a critical role in regulating the flow of objects, information and persons, facilitating the development of a liberal political and economic space. Communication networks created what Deleuze and Guattari (1987 in Barry 1996, 127–128) have called a striated space: a space within which movements and flows are regulated in ways that enable authorities to act; a space that is measured, directed and standardized. Yet, media has mattered even more in less democratic contexts, becoming a social engineering tool for governments – if necessary, to propagate moral panics – even if it merely publicized their political statements. As our case study demonstrates, the politicians’ panic as expressed in the media around the stagnating population growth in Turkey serves as a collateral legitimization that the fertility and the fecundity of a nation are the primary indicators of its strength.

Let us briefly explain our conceptualization of how slogans yield the formulation of normative mechanisms that can affect public deliberation of an issue. The mental horizons separating that which actually ‘enters’ our minds from that which is excluded as irrelevant are by no means entirely personal. When we confine our attention and concern to certain mental tunnels or exclude certain parts of reality from our attention and concern as irrelevant, we do so not just as human beings but also as social beings (Zerubavel 2009, 40). In other words, it is usually as members of particular thought-communities that we ignore and appreciate certain things. Our social environment normally determines what we attend, ignore, and organize inside our heads, affecting the way we classify the world (Zerubavel 2009, 42). In the end, engaging with the public deliberation over political discourse makes us part of a common place that constructs our identities. Henceforth, ‘our common-sense knowledge’ performs its constructive role in our everyday life and on how these schemata are acted out (Goffman 1974 in Pan and Kosicki 2003, 37–38). In politics,

metalanguage demarcates space and determines many political dispositions through shared acts, articulation (Stormer 2004, 257) and imaginations. Our article shows that articulations and social representations of morality and responsibility matter to an extent that the ruling politicians introduce them to affect our commonsense knowledge with respect to population stagnation or decrease.

Effectively, some rules do not just regulate, but also create the possibility of the very behavior that they regulate (Searle 2010, 10). Essentially, a successful mechanism of social engineering expands the impact of rules through explicit and implicit mechanisms. Explicit ones may refer to public policies, but discursive governance adopts more implicit forms. Based on Searle's (2010, 91) interpretation of speech acting as the basis of all institutional realities, we present the construction of language with strategic slogans and subsequent framing with the use of these slogans as crucial tools to inculcate ideas in line with the wishes of the authority in charge. This signifies leaders' active sensemaking. Thus, when new social problems arise, our model suggests, discourses in circulation provide 'templates' for understanding and judging different proposed solutions. By relying on shared social representations as the basis for comparative judgments, creative slogans in circulation become accessible to a public that has little knowledge of or interest in the actual debate (Lau and Schlesinger, 2005, 79). We consider the repeated emphasis on "three children slogan" by the ruling party in Turkey in all sorts of contexts as their effort to boost the resonance of this very slogan.

Eventually, there emerges a habitus that hosts public philosophies as metaproblem definitions, which shape how specific problems are defined for the individual and affect the nature of ideas promising viable solutions to any newly defined problem in politics. Politicians as claimants choose definitions geared to

expand their cause, to mobilize ‘attentive publics’ and, hence, control the political agenda (Yishai 1993, 208) by means of a metaproblem definition on specific topics that might have been unfamiliar terrain for their audiences (Mehta 2011, 42-43). That is how, in time, certain belief systems may become ubiquitous for public use as normative yardsticks of value judgment that are eventually largely accepted and unquestioned. They remain powerful to the extent that they constrain the public perceptions of what is legitimate as they prescribe what is ‘acceptable’ and even what is ‘good’ in societies (Korkut et.al. eds. 2015). Those who define the terms usually win the debates (Jordan 1994, 5) in effect to the later deliberative reasoning of the public. Thereafter, political actors use these collective rationalities in order to accrue support for political action without going through the established policy making channels such as debate at the parliamentary floor and following legislative procedures. This is how discursive governance works in effect to population politics and beyond.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has depicted the tendency of government politicians in Turkey to advance population politics with slogans rather than with specific goals endorsing pro-birth policies. Through discussing the morality element that politicians associate with their definition of population politics, we also indicated the tension between the Islamist ideology of the current government, including the president, and the reproductive rights of women. We primarily followed the way that media resonated the then Prime Minister and now President Erdoğan’s discourse on population, and channeled his pro-birth slogans merely through publicizing them. We followed the role of media here as an arena where politicians can use to affect public reasoning. As

we also showed, these slogans seek to influence the public sphere and achieve collective value judgments aligned with the normative positions of politicians. This is a form of political action without going through the established legislative mechanisms.

Alongside Erdoğan, we also illustrated the discourse from various AKP politicians as well as the new Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. We reflected on how politicians refer to the population problem in different contexts, regardless of the audience or occasion, accounting for the role that the media play in the public's deliberative reasoning. Our article shows how semi-free media in less democratic contexts can boost the resonance of political discourse. Subsequently, this discourse acquires an independent existence beyond the context where it is initially expressed. In summary, we state that plausibly the population issue was not of much importance for the public in Turkey until the media started to circulate the politicians' 'three children' slogan and facilitated the transformation of political discourses into normative mechanisms to demarcate a discursively constructed reality around the importance of having children. However, we need to underline that our article did not go as far as testing the power of this discourse on the behavior of the target population – even if there is a recent increase in the number of births in Turkey. Testing the actual impact of discourse on social behavior is important and should be followed with future empirical research.

At the outset, it could appear as puzzling that Turkey – a country with a young population growing at a healthy pace – has active population politics. Yet, in order to dispel this puzzle around our case study, we highlighted two dimensions of population politics – identity aspect and economic value – that were expressed through pro-birth slogans. It appears that these dimensions are of particular importance to population

politics. Identity and economy issues interrelate in effect to population debates. While the identity aspect of population politics presents women with morality, its economic value puts responsibility on the nation. In this way, politicians' slogans stimulate the public to engage with the population issue using the terms that politicians set. Therefore, our article indicates that population figures can become an issue for politicians to debate even in the absence of ageing or decreasing population.

Much of the early Republican Turkish history illustrated the extent of social engineering that the Republican forefathers carried out in effect related to various social issues. Therefore, in the case of Turkey, it is not novel to ask how the state gradually gets a hand on its subjects and their imaginations via social engineering to express 'enhanced state capacity' (Scott 1998, 3). In less democratic contexts, the fewer audits there are on the state, the more expansive its social engineering becomes, and it encompasses the exercise of all possible state policies aimed at changing a given society (Üngör 2008, 16). However, our article contributes to a re-assessment of the tactics through which the state-society boundary has been continually redefined in less democratic contexts as "the daily practices through which the techniques of government [...] define both the state and the citizen subject in Turkey" (Secor 2007, 37). We propose that the discursive construction of population politics in Turkey operates as a form of social engineering to boost population growth in the absence of actual policies that may facilitate this outcome.

To this extent, we note that policy debates have become irrelevant to the 'population problem' in Turkey, as slogans creatively mold the public deliberation on and interpretation of population figures echoing the leader's vision. Inasmuch as population stagnation threatening Turkey's future becomes the metanarrative, the discursive construction of the problem and its solutions precedes deliberations on

policy action to maintain the future of Turkish prosperity and identity – if they are in danger at all. In discussing the theoretical implications of our case study, we depicted how this process takes place.

We propose that the most important tenets of this form of governance are not policy changes that may indeed serve population growth and the related issues, but a discursive governance of population politics via the creation of normative mechanisms supported by an encompassing morality and responsibility argument. In a nutshell, the circulation of discourses becomes a form of governance and transforms them into normative mechanisms conditioning public philosophies. There is a further appeal of using discursive governance to study the general tenets of “moral politics” emerging in American as well as in European politics including its Turkish and Russian variants. We believe at the face of judicial guarantees over general freedoms and liberties, conservative politicians may turn to discursive governance in order to prevent consolidation of particularly gender rights, but also human rights for refugees when legislative frameworks incapacitate or delay them from taking action.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The Turkish population is the second reason out of ten as to why foreigners should invest in Turkey. See the Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Investment Support and Promotion Agency website at <http://www.invest.gov.tr/enUS/investmentguide/Pages/10Reasons.aspx> (last accessed 15.03.2015).



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- <sup>2</sup> T.C. Anonim Şirketi, available at, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/231423/T.C.\\_Anonim\\_Sirketi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/231423/T.C._Anonim_Sirketi.html) (15.03.2015).
- <sup>3</sup> 3 Çocuğa az kaldı, Cumhuriyet, 18.04.2015
- <sup>4</sup> According to the 2014 Freedom House Report on Press Freedom, media in Turkey are 'not free', available at, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/turkey#.VPRyRShV-rg> (last accessed 02.03.2015). Also, in her review of tabloidization of news media in Turkey, Gencel Bek (2004, 374) argues that the public in Turkey were discouraged from discussing politics and encouraged to focus more on religion and popular culture, especially football and the sensationalist press. These were considered to be the antidote to leftist militancy.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Çeyiz devletten üç çocuğa 1300 lira', available at, <http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/ekonomi/cocugu-olana-300-lira-2060434> (last accessed 15.03.2015).
- <sup>6</sup> 'Aşkın ve muhabbetin ne zaman geleceği belli olmaz, geldi mi çarpar', available at, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/askin-ve-muhabbetin-ne-zaman-gelecegi-belli-olmaz-geldi-mi-carpar,283593> (last accessed 20.03.2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Türkiye’de kürtaj gizlice yasaklandı, available at, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/saglik-yasam/25989956.asp> (last accessed 15.03.2015).
- <sup>8</sup> “Erdoğan'dan 'öğrenci evi' açıklaması”, available at, [http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YCVoc02\\_4ncisNYAQ](http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YCVoc02_4ncisNYAQ) (last accessed 15.10.2015)
- <sup>9</sup> “Erdoğan'dan 'öğrenci evi' açıklaması”, available at, [http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YCVoc02\\_4ncisNYAQ](http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogandan-ogrenci-evi-aciklamasi,q1H4YCVoc02_4ncisNYAQ) (last accessed 15.10.2015)

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